

Exploring Career Choices of Emirati Women in the Technology Sector

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Abstract

Purpose - The study explores the factors that influence Emirati women's career choice in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). We contribute to the influence of context in career choices by investigating how Emirati women chose IT as a profession through the lens of Social Cognitive Career Theory.

Design/methodology/approach - We undertook in-depth interviews with twenty-one Emirati women working in technology in the UAE. The study considers women's career choices at three levels i.e. from an individual, organisational and national context perspective.

Findings - Key findings include identifying the importance of national context in influencing career choices among other factors such as family centrality; desire to be seen as a role model, company reputation and government policy.

Practical implications - The study has wider implications for women's career choices in other contexts. The findings highlight the challenges women face, such as a lack of role models and family centrality, which need to be considered in recruitment policies and practices in other national contexts.

Originality/value - The originality of the study is its contribution to the literature developing understanding of the influences on women's career choices in the Emirates. While previous studies have identified the role of patriarchal influence on women's careers, we have less understanding of the importance attributed to individual factors such as being perceived as a role model within their family and to society. Similarly, the literature provides limited evidence of the influence of factors such as Government sponsorship and company reputation.

Keywords – Careers, Social Cognitive Career Theory, Qualitative Research, Emirati

Women, Technology.

Paper type - Research Paper

Introduction

A wide range of factors influences career choices (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Developing an understanding of how individual and national factors influence career choices can provide useful insights for organisations addressing recruitment challenges. This is particularly prevalent in underrepresented groups such as women working in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). The reasons for women entering and departing careers in STEM in the West have become more widely researched (Buschor, Berweger, Frei and Kappler, 2013; Duberley and Cohen, 2010; Eccles, 2009; Fouad, Fitzpatrick and Liu, 2011; Fouad et al., 2016; Sjaastad, 2011; Zeldin, Britner and Pajares, 2008). However, we know less about what factors influence the career choices of women in the Arab Middle East (Marmenout and Lirio, 2014; Tlaiss, 2015) and specifically within women's STEM career choices in a UAE context (Al Marzouqi and Forster, 2011; Mahani and Molki, 2011), with scant literature identifying the Technology sector. A better understanding of why women enter professions in Technology is especially important when we consider the global shortage of talent in STEM areas and the problems associated with the attrition of women in these disciplines (Blickenstaff, 2005; Singh, Zhang, Wan and Fouad, 2018).

A variety of reasons for leaving STEM professions suggested from previous research notes the existing structure of science based careers act as an impediment to women's careers (Duberley and Cohen, 2010). This view is supported by Fouad et al., 2016) who argue organisational and individual factors contribute towards the decision to leave an organisation. They suggest the lack of support from line managers and the absence of career development opportunities influences attrition rates. A further challenge in retaining women in STEM careers relates to work life balance and in particular motherhood (see Howe-Walsh et al., 2016; Barabino et al., 2019).

The originality of the study is its contribution to the literature developing an understanding of the influences on women's career choices in the Emirates. While previous studies have identified the role of patriarchal influence on women's careers (Olmsted, 2005), we have less understanding of the importance attributed to individual factors such as being perceived as a role model. Similarly, the literature provides limited evidence of the influence of factors such as Government sponsorship and company reputation. Furthermore, the findings contribute to our understanding of women's career choices in the wider context.

Within the existing career literature, the contextual embeddedness of careers is receiving increased attention (Mayrhofer, Meyer and Steyrer, 2007; Tungli and Peiperl, 2009). Furthermore, there is growing recognition of the influence national context has on individual career management and decisions, and the related need to better understand the attitudes, beliefs, values and social norms informing individual careers (Forstenlechner and Baruch, 2013; Shen et al., 2015). Previous studies regarding careers have largely focussed on Western countries (Shen et al., 2015) and little attention has been given to less industrialised and developing nations (Forstenlechner and Baruch, 2013; Lent et al., 2005; Shen et al., 2015). The UAE national context is an important one to consider. Developing a better understanding of the contextual influences on Emirati women's career choices contributes to the career literature in this under-researched region (Forstenlechner and Baruch, 2013; Marmenout and Lirio, 2014; Mellahi et al., 2011; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011 a,b).

The current study *firstly* extends the career choice literature by providing a greater understanding of how individual and national factors influence the career choices of Emirati women. *Secondly*, the paper contributes in identifying factors that influence Emirati women to enter Technology professions in particular. Considering the challenge faced by Governments globally to address the under-representation of women working in STEM fields (Duberley and Cohen, 2010; Glass, Sassler, Levitte and Michelmore, 2013; Reuben, Sapienza

and Zingales 2014; Walton et al., 2015) the study has significant theoretical and managerial implications. A better understanding of why women enter STEM careers to begin with may help to identify why they leave their career later on (Buse, Bilimoria and Perelli, 2013; Diekman, Brown, Johnston and Clark, 2010; Wang, Eccles and Kenny, 2013). Such knowledge may help to understand how some countries experience a bursting pipeline in contrast to the more widely discussed leaky pipeline in STEM. *Thirdly*, we contribute theoretically by developing the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent, Brown and Hackett, 1994; Lent and Brown, 2013) to understand the context-specific characteristics of career choices. Through SCCT we explore, how Emirati women make career choices and what influences their decisions.

The paper begins with a review of the literature relating to women's career choices and career theory. Next, the methodology is presented followed by the findings of the study. The discussion and conclusions follow with further consideration as to the limitations of the study and future research opportunities.

Literature review

Women's career choices in context

Increasing women's participation in the workforce is arguably one of the most essential factors for growth and competitiveness to an economy (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2017). Women in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are seen to be enthusiastic to progress their careers (Women's Career in the GCC, 2015) acknowledging the opportunities to develop their careers while noting the challenges (Miller, Kyrazi and Paris, 2017).

Increased unemployment amongst local nationals particularly in the 1990's proved the impetus for GCC countries to formalise national policies to redress the balance of labour. The results of nationalisation policies have proved mixed with the public sector

employing more local workers than the private sector, where the number remains low (Sfakianakis, 2012; Howe-Walsh, Turnbull and Budhwar, 2018). In order to increase nationals working in the private sector the UAE encourages and supports progressive initiatives of Emiratisation (Al-Ali, 2008, Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2014; Benchiba-Savenius et al., 2016). Emiratisation is seen as a social capital programme which, "seeks to overcome structural barriers to Emirati employment in organisations, and address social issues rising from citizens' entry into the labour market" (Al-Ali, 2008, p.368). The UAE Government has set ambitious targets to increase the number of nationals working in the private sector as part of the UAE's Vision 2021 strategy, with the aim to increase national participation in the private sector from 1% to 5% by 2021 (Emiratization Efforts in the Private Sector, 2013).

The UAE is a Muslim Majority Country with Emirati nationals following Islam as a faith. Within the UAE culture, Islamic values influence women's career and suggests that women are encouraged to pursue careers deemed culturally acceptable to maintain the gendered work practices. Particularly strong family bonds and the nature of the patriarchal contract dominates Arab society (Olmsted, 2005) reinforcing the likelihood of fathers influence in career choices.

Studies have identified that a number of intrinsic motivators influence Arab women's careers, including; personal growth, recognition, independence, making a difference, sense of purpose, self-motivation, financial reward and power (Women in the United Arab Emirates: A Portrait of Progress, 2007; Dunlop, Schreiber and El-Attar, 2015). While it is helpful to understand more about the factors that inspire women in their careers in the UAE, we have less knowledge about what influences their choice of career to enter into professions such as technology.

Arguably, women in the UAE studying technology have benefited from government support to enter Higher Education. The UAE is the highest ranked of all Arab nations for gender equality and is the only MENA country to have closed the educational attainment gap (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2017). In 2014, the enrolment ratio within tertiary education in the UAE was 76% women, 24% men (Dunlop, Schreiber and El Attar, 2015). In the Emirate of Dubai, the number of Emirati women graduating with degrees in 2011/2012 was higher than Emirati males (Government of Dubai, 2012/2013). Much of this success can be attributed to the UAE Government's strategic vision for women and the placing of women's career development as a national imperative (Women in the United Arab Emirates: A Portrait of Progress, 2007). However, in the last decade the participation rate of women in the workforce remains far lower than men and lower than in geographical close neighbours Qatar and Bahrain, suggesting there is still much to be done to attract women into the workplace (see Table 1).

Table 1: United Arab Emirates, Human Development Indices and Indicators (2017)

Previous studies have examined the career experiences of women in the Arab Middle East (Omair, 2008; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011a, b). Tlaiss (2013) for example identified the influence of social, cultural and organisational factors that influence Emirati women's career success. Williams, Wallis and Williams (2013) highlight the strength of the 'patriarchal bargain' that Emirati women face when entering the workforce. They identify the influence of Emirati fathers on their daughter's career decisions, highlighting a preference for their daughters to work in the public sector.

Marmenout and Lirio (2014) extend our understanding of Emirati women's work experiences providing evidence of the specific challenges women face in their career, which are seen as unique to women in the Gulf region. Their findings highlight the difficulty in

reconciling family and career interests as well as the challenge to meet societal norms (Marmenout and Lirio, 2014). In particular, there is scant knowledge about what influences Emirati women to enter Technology professions (Al Marzouqi and Forster, 2011; Samulewicz, Vidican and Aswad, 2012).

Career Theory

We make a case through the following discussion that argues a choice of pursuing a career can be explored through the lens of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). The initial ‘*social cognitive theory*’ was first initiated in the late 1970’s (Bandura, 1977), and further built upon (Bandura, 1986; 1997). Hackett and Betz (1981) were then the first to apply Bandura’s theory by emphasizing on the role of ‘self-efficacy’ in the context of career choice. This theory was then developed further by Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994) who developed a conceptual framework to explain career development: (1) career and academic interests develop, (2) career relevant choices are made, and (3) performance outcomes are achieved. The theoretical emphasis of this theory was primarily to explore the ‘content’ questions as to *where* people ended up rather than the journey (or *process*) to *get there* (Lent and Brown, 2013; Lent, 2013). A further extension of the framework was subsequently undertaken (Lent and Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 2017) which led to a discussion of these ‘*content*’ questions, which mainly related to educational experiences shaping career success. Overall, these scholars argue that such ‘*process*’ related decisions to career choices, influenced by contextual conditions such as, transition points from school to work, job searches, personal goals, as well as dealing with career challenges are less understood to inform career choices.

Previous research has also explored the noteworthy differences of an important determinant i.e. gender in career choices, highlighting women are more reliant on the

interaction with others to build self-efficacy to develop career decisions (see for e.g. Hackett and Betz, 1981; Zeldin, Britner and Pajares, 2008). Additionally, such decisions are more likely to be influenced by societal expectations that attract women to different careers (Williams and Subich, 2006). Given these arguments, and in the context of our paper, the importance of exploring the contextual factors such as the national context in terms of gender is useful and contributing as such an attempt aims to highlight the development of career choices.

Our deliberate choice of SCCT as a theoretical lens helps elucidate varied reasons for women choosing careers in STEM by considering the specific context that influences the choice of careers, particularly in underrepresented areas such as STEM (Fouad and Santana, 2017). Previous studies that utilized the SCCT lens (highlight the influence of familial expectations in career choice decisions as well as the prestige of the career (e.g. Flores and O'Brien, 2002; O'Neill Shapiro, Ingols, and Blake-Beard, 2013; Scheuermann, Tokar and Hall, 2014). Research also identifies the role of parental reinforcements when it comes to careers in STEM, as highlighted in Sjaastad's (2013) research into Norwegian STEM students, wherein it was found that women were six times more likely than their male counterparts to mention their fathers as an influence for their career choice. Norway is noted to be a highly feminine society (Hofstede, 2019) in contrast to the UAE and yet, fathers are key influencers in career choices. Additionally, findings from this study also note that women were more likely to call upon a broad spectrum of individuals in their lives to help them define themselves and guide their career choices. There is also evidence of initial career interest to be related to previous learning experiences (e.g. Betz and Schifano, 2000; Buschor, Kappler, Freu and Berweger, 2014; Williams and Subich, 2006; Swan, 2015), which reinforces the importance of encouragement by academics to pursue STEM subjects from an early age. Contextual factors to explain entering and departing engineering and technology

professions are explored in Fouad et al's., 2016 research. Their study highlights micro-aggressions, described as undermining women in the workplace by peers and managers. Additionally, they suggest the mistreatment of women resulting workplace hostility contributing to the departure of women in engineering and technology professions.

Within the SCCT literature, the support of role models is noted to directly affect career choice. Quimby and Destantis (2006) identified role models influence women's career choices. In particular, women who are pursuing perceived non-traditional careers benefit from the support of a role model. Furthermore, Young et al. (2013) argue that a positive female role model within STEM, allows women to identify themselves with science influences career decisions.

Based on the above arguments, we posit that the SCCT would provide a lens to explore career-related choices that may affect Emirati women's' decision to enter the technology sector. In particular, we focus on *process* related decisions to career choices of women, influenced by the context of the UAE.

Methodology

We adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore lived experiences of the participants (Smith, 2015). IPA's approach allows the participant to reflect on their experience of career choices, articulate their understanding through an interview and make sense of the experience encouraging a reflective approach to their interview (Smith 2018). Utilising this reflective approach allows us to explore their career choices (Willig, 2013) within Technology.

Most studies that engage with IPA generate data via interviews (Smith 2015). Schostak (2006) highlights that interviews are part of most people's daily experiences such as

radio, television and job interviews creating a level of familiarity that people are likely to respond to positively. The advantage of semi-structured interviews is the rapport and empathy developed to gain apposite data (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull and Howe-Walsh, 2018).

Our sample consisted of 21 in-depth interviews with Emirati women working in Technology in the UAE. The women were identified via a contact within a national organisation, who employed women in Technology, contacted through a gatekeeper. Further participants were recruited through a snowball sample, all the women who participated had expressed an interest in the study following a letter of invitation outlining the research (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Howe-Walsh, Turnbull and Budhwar, 2019). The relatively small sample size does not permit the study findings to be generalised and is not intended to be representative of the wider UAE female population. However, the data does provide rich insights into the career choices made by Emirati women and the influences on their career choice. IPA studies usually adopt a small sample size to enable a comprehensive account of the experiences of the participants (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014).

The main characteristic of our sample is as follows: thirteen of the Emirati women were single and the remainder were married women. Only five of the married women had at least one child. Of the 21 interviews, the majority were aged between 22-36 years old, with between 3 to 14 years work experience. Due to the nature of the sample population, we adopted a snowball strategy, acknowledged apposite to rare populations (Bryman, 2015). We approached a public sector organisation in the first instance where female Technology experts were employed. The participants were invited to an individual interview after attending a development workshop for Emirati women hosted by a multinational Emirati company. This approach enabled further referrals to participants in the private sector. The women worked in

both public and private sectors, with three participants currently engaged in full time study undertaking career breaks (see Table 2).

Table 2: Demographic Profile of participants (see end of paper)

The interviews were guided by Spradley's (1979) ethnographic approach for interviewing and adopted questions that allow for descriptive, structural and contrast to be asked (Spradley, 2016). These questions provide an opportunity for the interviewer to build rapport with interviewees and slowly introduce new elements of enquiry during the interview process (Flick, 2018). Building a relationship with the interviewees was an important consideration during the methodological planning stage, given the interviewers were from a Western culture and the interviewees were all Emirati Nationals. Furthermore, Spradley's (2016) systematic question technique allowed interviewers to explore issues which arose spontaneously during the interview (Flick, 2018) and encouraged interviewees to answer in 'native terms' (Spradley, 2016).

Descriptive questions: These allow biographical questions to be asked and assist in establishing a 'friendly conversation' (Spradley, 1979): "What is your current role?" "How long have you worked in the company?"

Structural questions: These explore how interviewees organise their knowledge around an issue (Flick, 2018): "What does it mean to be an Emirati woman working in Technology?"

Contrast questions: These allow the interviewers to explore how objects and events are differentiated in their 'native terms' (Flick, 2018; Spradley, 2016). While directed contrast questions suggested by Spradley (2016) can be closed questions, these help to verify and elicit contrasts between issues and events in 'native terms', "Do you think you made the right choice to work in Technology, rather than vocational training.

The interviews were conducted face to face in English by female researchers, lasting up to one and a half hours. Conducting interviews was deemed acceptable, as all of the participants has been educated in English at diploma or degree level. Where permission was granted (n=12) we recorded the interviews of the participants in line with the ethical guidelines of our university, providing information regarding the purpose of the study, informed consent and the right to withdraw (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Willig, 2013). For those respondents unwilling to be recorded we wrote detailed notes facilitated by a member of the research team acting as note taker, to recount responses during the interview to reduce the possibility of memory bias (Fisher and Schreiber, 2017). Additionally, we requested participants to check their transcript for accuracy referred to as *member check* (Douglas, 1976; Cresswell and Miller, 2000). In order to ensure reliability; all of the data was independently read and coded by two of the researchers (Neuendorf, 2002). All researchers undertook a careful review of the themes and met to ensure agreement was reached regarding the main themes and supporting statements: *peer debriefing* (Guba and Lincoln, 1982).

In accordance with IPA four stages were followed (Willig, 2013). Firstly, the researchers read and reread all of the data transcriptions, notes were recorded and descriptive comments noted. The second stage identified emergent themes such as the influence of parents, inspiring family and wider society, work life balance, maternity, public and private

sector organisations and government support for education. The third stage clustered the themes into family centrality; role models; company reputation and government policy. Within government policy, we included governmental intervention for extended maternity leave and restricting working hours, which some of the respondents mentioned. Finally, we developed a summary to capture participant's experiences of career choice utilising quotations identified to illustrate the themes. Participants were provided with a pseudonym to protect their identity. Additionally, we have not highlighted their job title as this may identify the public sector organisation (see Table 3).

INSERT Table 3 here (see end of paper)

Findings

We present our data using quotations to highlight the key themes that emerged from the interviews: family centrality, role models, company reputation and government policy. The findings provide an insight into the influence of context on women's career choices.

Family centrality

The influence of family upon career choice was strongly echoed by all the respondents. Discussions at home regarding career choices with parents had led all of the women to either pursue their first choice of career or an alternative career thought to be appropriate by their parents. Often the first choice of parents has been a medically related field; in contrast, the women expressed a range of career aspirations such as architect, HR and journalism (Aisa, Amara, Noor, Salama, Lula, Soroya). This supports the existing literature on patriarchal influence (Olmsted, 2005).

“My family have specific conditions and role for the workplace that they want me to work with, because Emirati family has their own culture” (Fatima)

“I always looked up to my father and he was my role model for my whole life. So I didn’t look to finding someone else to inspire me...I found myself interested in technology. So everyone kept saying ‘Yeah, you are taking after your father, you want to be a technical engineer like your father.’ I said ‘No, he didn’t force me and he didn’t say anything, it’s my own choice.’ So then he helped me find a good university and I joined. So, at that time very few girls get in that department...at my class we were only 7 girls and I’m the only UAE national” (Salma)

“My parents are my guiding force and if today I have confidence in myself and in my work, I owe it to them for the person I am today” (Lyla)

There was some reticence from the women to acknowledge whether familial influence had unduly caused the respondents to pursue alternative careers. Thus suggesting that some of the women had changed their initial career interests to forge what was perceived to be ‘a career relevant choice’ (Lent, et al. 1994). For example, Salma commented that she wanted a job in a creative field rather than medicine, which her parents preferred. Salma explained her mother wanted her to study dentistry but her father was an engineer who studied his degree in the UK. Ultimately, Salma made her own choice to study technology. However, some women were more candid, highlighting familial influence had provided the impetus to pursue a profession rather than stay at home. The commonality between all of the respondents was the desire to please their parents and in particular their fathers with their chosen career. Despite the fact that their first choice of career was not always been pursued, there was an overwhelming pride from each of the participants in their career achievements.

“He (father) didn’t want me to work, just sitting at home. He told me if you want to study, you study and work, but other than that, no way you stay at home with your mum, and this [staying at home] was not my dream” (Caliyah)

“I’m living this life to make them (parents) happy” (Asia)

The location of where the women studied for example in an overseas country had to be deemed acceptable to parents. In some circumstances, this played a crucial role in the chosen

career path causing some of the women to change their initial career choice. Some participants were pursuing IT as a second choice, thus reinforcing the patriarchal role in influencing career choice. However, it is worth noting that the influence was from both parents, in some cases just the mother's influence. Amara highlighted her mother's influence in encouraging her to pursue her career in Technology. Mothers reinforced the cultural expectation for Emirati women to study in the country and city of their home. Ultimately, location affects their career choices through the courses available near their home.

“When I finished school I wanted to study architecture...but the only obstacle that I had was that the University was in LA (USA) which is so far and I had to stay in their accommodation which my parents worried about” (Lula)

“My family were happy with IT and I was able to study in Dubai” (Noor)

The other impact of choosing to study and remain in UAE aligns with the national policy of Emiratisation and growing local talent by providing opportunities to study courses that lead to jobs within the Emirates (Al-Ali, 2008; Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2014).

Role Models

An important individual context was how important it was to the women to be a role model to others. Their ability to act as a role model to siblings was evident with the majority of interviewees. There was a sense that it was a duty to act as an ambassador for future generations. The respondents were all very positive that they were able to contribute to the wider society to act as role models as educated modern working women.

“I play the role that is meant to inspire, instruct and to set a good example to others. Whether you're trying to teach others core values...role models don't have to be perfect they do have to show that everyone makes mistakes and it is important to be accountable for them” (Layla)

“It felt like a challenge (studying electrical engineering) that I wanted to prove to them (other women) nothing is impossible, nothing is hard” (Amina)

“I have gained a career, my career portrays me as a mentor to my friend's circle and more important a role model to my family, to whom I am their guiding force” (Lyla)

“My sisters will take me as a leader, as a person they can follow. In the same way they will say OK, I would like to be like my sister, I want to be the best” (Caliyah)

Becoming a role model to family and friends was an aspiration for all of the women interviewed. The sense of contributing to society by encouraging more women to enter education and professions such as Technology was deemed a crucial factor in why the women had chosen their career trajectory. Moreover, the sense that as an Arab woman they would be recognised as an international female role model was highly prevalent. Highlighting the importance of both an individual fulfilment to be a role model in a national context to inspire more women to choose careers in Technology (Samulewicz, Vidican and Aswad, 2012; Quimby and DeSantis, 2006). This reinforces the importance of female role models to attract women into Technology.

Company reputation

The reputation of the company had a significant influence upon their career choice aligned to whether the organisation is public or private. There is some overlap between patriarchal influences and the decision to work for a particular company. The interviewee's parents as well as the women working for the organisation shared the value of the reputation of the organisation. One aspect of reputation is the work environment for women. Working for a public organisation assures common understanding of the accepted cultural expectations for Emiratis. Some women felt a private company would not necessarily meet their cultural expectations for example, Soroya commented that wearing a hijab in a public company was more acceptable.

“We wanted to join this organisation because it is respected” (Zahara)

“He (father) is very proud of me. He likes everybody asking where I work” (Lula)

The company's ability to reward, develop and recognise individual achievements was highlighted by all of the respondents as a significant reason to work there, extending our understanding of the importance placed upon prestige of the career choice (Flores and O'Brien, 2002; O'Neil et al., 2013). Women working in the public sector, the majority of our respondents, highlighted the benefits of working within a public company. Structured career paths were discussed by all of the women as highly valued. The participants acknowledged the wealth of opportunities to them to develop their careers noted to be a factor of discontent (Duberey and Cohen, 2010).

“The development opportunities are better than the public sector” (Aisha)

“Expectations are high...I got a chairman's award. It's the highest award you can get” (Naima)

“I choose a private company because I believe it is the fastest growth for my career...if you have talent you could quickly get promoted” (Layla)

Opportunities afforded by large public sector organisations were a positive inducement towards a career in technology, this concurs with the findings of Williams, Wallis and Williams (2013) regarding the appeal of public sector organisations. However, there was acknowledgement that career opportunities for advancement were more readily available in the private sector, despite the majority of respondents choosing to work in the public sector.

Government policy

There appears to be positive support to enable women to engage with education to further their career advancement. Support is provided in terms of education including full scholarships to study as well as the opportunity to gain advice from independent career advisers.

“We had many universities where we could take scholarships...they were offering lots of scholarship programmes at the time around career needs” (Soryoya)

“I went to college for one year it was a foundation degree where you could think about what you wanted to do and then specialise. I took various subjects and undertook a challenge test, where I was invited to specialise straight away in IT” (Noor)

“Support from the government was because they believed in the role of women in society” (Fatima)

Government sponsorship in terms of supporting career development was widely reported to have directly benefited the interviewees; this aligns with Emiratisation policies, which support progressive initiatives to facilitate Emirati employment (Al-Ali, 2008). Most had gained from paid study leave, financial support and for further developmental courses and qualifications. Obtaining internationally recognised qualifications was important to the women. The opportunity to work abroad was not the main motive, however, the option to work and more importantly, to work for an international organisation was seen to be appealing.

Some of the women raised the issue of maternity provision; the participants were keen to comment on the length of maternity leave supported by the government in contrast to European countries. Therefore, longer maternity leave, as well as additional childcare arrangements such as crèche and nursery provision, could support women to maintain their careers. With continued expectations for educated female Emiratis to work, the situation of work life balance and child care issues are set to heighten. While extended family often helped with childcare, many women were concerned that this was not a long term solution. Indeed, where families have several siblings working it was not practical to rely of grandparents for childcare.

“Maternity leave is 45 days paid plus you can take 45 days’ unpaid leave. Unpaid leave is an exception and up to your manager. I took 45 days plus 1 additional month, totalling 2 1/2 months. My mum is able to look after my children, my eldest is in nursery in the morning and finishes at noon and my son stays with my mum. All my siblings work so there are no other options for childcare. If you are educated it is the

expectation that you will work. It's the work environment that is not encouraging” (Noor).

“To balance between family and work is not easy. I am making my best to balance” (Layla).

Less than a quarter of the women have children and the issues raised regarding childcare were noted to be a real concern for how the women would maintain their careers. This suggests government intervention to develop child care options would be a welcome to support women remaining in their technology career.

Discussion

Through the lens of SCCT the findings highlight that family centrality; role models, company reputation and government policy are key factors influencing Emirati women's decisions to enter careers in Technology (see Figure 1). Our findings reinforce the influence of contextual factors for individual career choices.

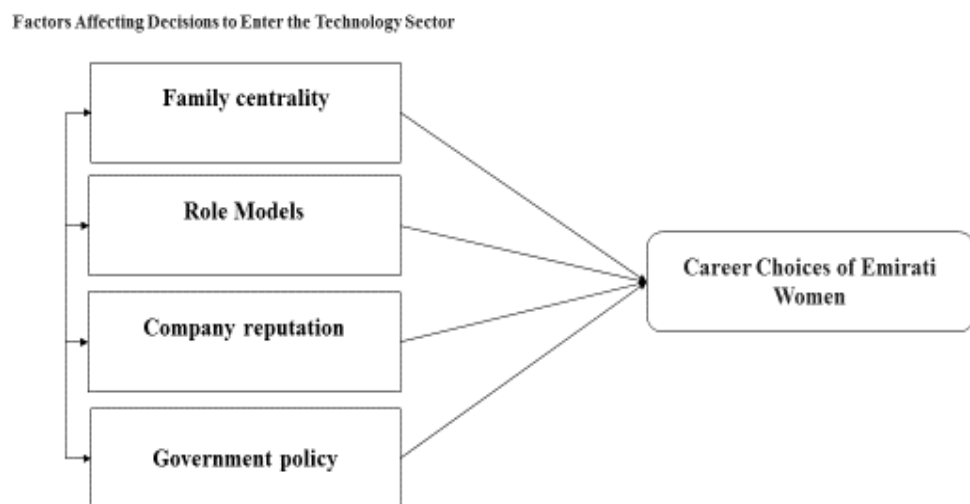


Figure 1: Model of factors that influence Emirati womens' decisions to enter careers in Technology.

A core finding of the study was the strong influence of family on career choice (Sjaastad, 2013). While previous studies identified a ‘patriarchal bargain’ for Emirati women entering the workforce (Williams, Wallis and Williams, 2013); clearly, our study highlights the influence from both parents as well as the wider national context. However, the support from both parents was positive towards pursuing a career.

The findings further suggest careers in Technology are seen to be respectable and prestigious choices (Scheuermann et al., 2014) for Emirati women and are supported by the family. This is important if more women are to be attracted into STEM professions in the Arab Middle East and as part of the wider issue of Emiratisation to work in the private sector aligning with the 2021 vision for the Emirates.

The study also suggests that being seen as a role model was an important factor in the choice of career for Emirati women. This finding has implications for both the literature on women in STEM and our knowledge of women in the UAE. The current study identifies the desire for Emirati women to be seen as ambassadors for future generations, not just locally but globally. The women were keen to act as role models for younger sisters and their own children and many saw this as their duty to society, which provides implications for government policy and future Emirati National Development Programmes. For governments in the Arab Middle East wishing to encourage more women to enter professions such as STEM it would be important to highlight the value of women in these careers. Women reaching senior positions need to be recognised as role models and ambassadors to encourage future generations to enter STEM professions (Young et al., 2013). Future role models within a society are important to advance and inspire women’s career choice (Gibson, 2004).

Findings from our study further suggest that women’s choice of career is also influenced by the reputation of the company. This has implications for both governments

wishing to encourage Emirati women to enter STEM professions, as well as private sector and public sector organisations wishing to attract Emirati women. It was seen to be important for the women to work for an organisation that was respected in their society and where they felt they would be able to develop their careers. Hence, government programmes would be advised to ensure they continue to align their programmes with organisations that have a good reputation. In addition, both public and private sector employers need to ensure that they are well respected in society and have programmes in place to develop their Emirati women. Development programmes and opportunities for recognition were seen to be particularly important to the women. In particular, the study identified the importance of senior management recognition of their achievements. This supports previous findings that identify intrinsic motivation for women's careers (Dunlop, Schreiber and El Attar, 2015).

The study also highlights the influence of government policy. Findings suggest Emirati women were influenced by the availability of scholarship programmes provided by the government to enter technology. The influence of career advisors in their educational establishment was also evident. Such government initiatives, supported by career advisors appear to be encouraging women into STEM careers (Sjaastad, 2013). The findings also suggest in some cases Emirati women continue their education through government sponsored programmes. Scholarship programmes such as those discussed by the women could be expanded to encourage more women to enter and remain in STEM.

Furthermore, these findings suggest the UAE Government's efforts to focus on Emirati women's career development are proving successful. Further exploration of what factors have enabled these women to progress their careers and feel positive about their futures in STEM could provide valuable insights for future Development Programmes. Additionally, these insights help to guide organisational policy to support women's career development to capitalise on the importance of female role models.

The findings suggest that government sponsorship influences career choices. There are opportunities here to expand the role of the UAE government and launch an initiative to further attract, develop and advance Emirati women in STEM. While a number of initiatives such as, Absher (<https://www.abudhabi.ae/portal/public/en/citizens/benefits-for-nationals/employment-and-work/absheer-initiative>), Tanmia, the National Human Resources Employment Authority, Abu Dhabi Tawteen Council and the Emirates Nationals Development Program (<http://www.endp.ae/>) have been introduced to encourage participation of UAE nationals in the labour market and national economy, there is an opportunity to launch a ‘women in STEM’ initiative. Previous UAE Government initiatives have contributed towards creating job opportunities for nationals and have supported Emirati women’s career development. Future initiatives could focus specifically on creating opportunities for women in STEM professions. A joint initiative could be developed with some of the multinational organisations in the emirate, such as Emirates, Etihad, DUBAL and Dubai Ports Authority to provide women with opportunities to work and train in STEM fields.

The divide between public and private sector employment was noticeable. The private sector still suffers relatively low levels of Emiratisation, in part due to the reputation of private companies’ perceived terms and conditions of employment. Utilising the desire to be a role model and advocating the benefits of the private sector could enhance the reputation of the private sector as an employer. This in conjunction with developing the links between career advice and the influence of family could lead to targeted interventions in an educational and organisation setting. Initiatives, which focus on women’s recruitment to STEM in the private sector, could further advance Emiratisation in the UAE.

Theoretical and managerial implications

This study extends our understanding of how career choices are made (Bandura, 1986; Lent, Brown and Hackett, 1994; Lent and Brown, 2013). Previous approaches to understanding the development of women's career choices highlight the influence of self-efficacy (Hackett and Betz, 1981; Fouad and Santana, 2017). Using the lens of SCCT we contribute to the literature to develop greater understanding of Emirati women's career choice (Tlaiss, 2013; Williams, Wallis and Williams, 2013). We considered in particular the *process* of decisions relating to careers through the examination of how career related decisions are influenced by differing contexts including individual, organisational and national contexts (Lent and Brown, 2013). Previous research has focused on how an individual ended up in their career, which is answered in part by our research, however we highlight the importance of national context in career decisions.

This extends our knowledge of career experiences of women in the Arab Middle East (Omair, 2008; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010) and provides a rare insight into how Emirati women navigate their careers in technology. The results of the study have important implications for organisations and policy makers in the UAE to develop national strategies to support women entering careers in Technology as well the broader issues to encourage women into the workforce. At the forefront of the findings is the desire for women to be role models. There is huge potential in enabling women to be proactive role models and engage with other women considering technology careers at a wider national level. Recruitment policies and practices should consider how this could help attract Emirati women into STEM. For example, organisations could include Emirati role models as spokespersons within their future recruitment campaigns to inspire younger generations of Emirati women to consider careers in STEM fields.

The study highlights the influence of family is an important aspect of national context that impacts women's decisions about their careers and care needs to be taken to respect the

role that family plays on choices made. Where such influence may inhibit travel overseas for example, should be considered within the bounds of national context and the respect Emiratis have for their elders and not necessarily a lack of desire to travel or progress their careers. Furthermore, this should be considered within performance appraisals and career development planning to ensure Emirati women are not disadvantaged.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the wider literature on the challenges for women entering and progressing their careers in STEM (Buschor, et al. 2013; Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016). Considering the implications of the study in a wider context, the findings highlight the need to understand the individual contextual factors of women's career choices. Challenges facing women such as a lack of role models and family centrality need to be considered in recruitment policies and practices in other national contexts.

Limitations and future research

The results of the study need should be considered within the context of the possible limitations. First, Emirati women in technology provide an interesting sample, as this group of women have not been previously explored. However, given the diversity of the countries in the GCC, generalisations to the wider region are problematic. Extending the study to other GCC countries to explore the contextual influences on women's career choices would prove a fruitful direction for further research.

Second, identification of how widespread the contextual influences of family centrality, role models, government sponsorship and company reputation are on women's career choices in the UAE and GCC region would be of interest. Future studies could use a quantitative approach and larger sample to examine the prevalence of these influences. This would allow for regional differences to be identified and enhance our understanding of the diversity of career influences in the GCC.

Third, this study was a cross-sectional design and only permits data to be collected at one point in time. Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach and follow Emirati women from the point of their career entry and at stages within their career progression to allow for changes to be observed. This would allow for contextual influences to be examined over time.

Conclusion

The primary objective this study was to explore the experiences of Emirati women working in Technology to develop our understanding of career choices. The study has provided some valuable insights into Emirati women's career influences, highlighting the importance of national context within career decisions, extending SCCT to understand the context specific characteristics of career choices. Given the limited research on careers in this region, more studies are needed to understand how context influences other aspects of careers such as career interest and performance outcomes. Such research can develop our understanding of how to reduce the bursting pipeline.

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Table 1: United Arab Emirates, Human Development Indices and Indicators

	Population with at least some secondary education (%)		Labour force participation rate (%)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
United Arab Emirates	73.8	65.7	40.9	92.0
Bahrain	63.7	57.1	44.0	87.0
Qatar	70.9	68.0	58.1	94.6
Arab States	45.1	54.6	20.7	74.2

Source: 2018 Statistical Update Briefing note, United Nations

Table 2: Demographic Profile of participants

Code	Pseudonyms	Age Group	Education In Technology	Tenure in years	Married or Single	Children	Private or public sector company
1	Layla	31-35	Diploma	5	Married	2	Public
2	Aliyah	31-35	Diploma	12	Single	0	Private
3	Lyla	31-35	Degree	10	Single	0	Private
4	Amara	26-30	Diploma	3	Married	3	Public
5	Amina	31-35	Diploma	12	Single	0	Private
6	Nylah	31-35	Diploma	7	Single	0	Private
7	Zara	26-30	Diploma	2	Single	0	Private
8	Fatima	31-35	Diploma	Career break	Single	0	Career break
9	Amber	35-40	Diploma	7	Married	3	Public
10	Danna	31-35	Diploma	14	Married	1	Public
11	Imani	31-35	Diploma	Career break	Single	0	Career break
12	Aisha	31-35	Diploma	Career break	Single	0	Career break
13	Kanilah	26-30	Diploma	3	Single	0	Public
14	Noor	31-35	Degree	12	Married	2	Public
15	Salma	31-35	Degree	6	Married	0	Public
16	Asia	21-25	Diploma	5	Single	0	Public
17	Caliyah	21-25	Degree	4	Single	0	Public
18	Soroya	21-25	Degree	4	Married	0	Public
19	Lula	31-35	Masters Degree	6	Married	0	Public
20	Naima	21-25	Diploma	4	Single	0	Public
21	Zahara	26-30	Degree	4	Single	0	Public

Source: Participant data.

Table 3: Themes

Themes and supporting quotations	Participant number Page and line reference from transcribe
<p><i>Family Centrality</i></p> <p>My father told me...</p> <p>My parents are my guiding force...</p> <p>My dad said it would be better to be a dentist...</p> <p>My mum was right when she stopped me going into media...</p> <p>My Family wanted me to a doctor or engineer...but they were happy with IT.</p> <p>I chose architecture, my father was not so happy you have to work with many men. I had support from my family...</p> <p>My family influenced my career choice, my sisters was the biggest influence.</p> <p>When I got my diploma with distinction, I got the support from my partner and family as they realised my true abilities.</p> <p>My sister...influences my career choice...</p> <p>My family have specific conditions...Emirati culture affects our lives, so I have to choose a place which have mostly ladies...</p>	<p>1: p1, l25</p> <p>3: p1, l23</p> <p>16; p1, l36</p> <p>11: p7 l282-283</p> <p>14: p1, l16</p> <p>19: p14, l568-571</p> <p>19: p10, l411</p> <p>7: p1, l15-22</p> <p>4: p1, l30</p> <p>10: p1, l10</p> <p>8: p1, l18-21</p>
<p><i>Role Models</i></p> <p>I play the role that is meant to inspire...</p> <p>We found senior women who are in senior jobs in Emirates...</p> <p>I looked up to my father and he was my role model for my whole life</p> <p>Your mummy is a successful engineer so I can be better than her.</p>	<p>1: p5, l148</p> <p>17: p1, l28</p> <p>15: P16, l686-691</p>
<p><i>Company reputation</i></p> <p>I chose a private company, as I believe that it is fast growth for my career...you could get promoted quickly.</p> <p>Private sector to develop myself better than a public company</p> <p>Expectations are high I got a chairman's award.</p> <p>Government (public) company as most people talking Arabic.</p> <p>Government due to the packages, privileges provided, and duty hours.</p> <p>I prefer government company; stable environment....also gives us citizens the continued support to be in the first place in my field.</p>	<p>1: p1, l28</p> <p>12: p1, l10</p> <p>11: p1, l21-22</p> <p>4: p1, l28-29</p> <p>8: p1, l28</p>
<p><i>Government policy</i></p> <p>Scholarships around career needs.</p> <p>Challenge test to specialise in IT with scholarship...</p> <p>(Maternity pay you) know even in Canada you get 1 year, I wish I live somewhere like that...</p>	<p>18: p13 l368</p> <p>14: p,1, l20</p> <p>20: p5, l136</p>

Source: Participant data.